

Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, political leader and human rights activist dies in Cuba

By Gerardo Ducos, Cuba researcher at Amnesty International

Cuba lost one of its most respected human rights and pro-democracy campaigners this week when Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas fell victim to a tragic road accident on 22 July in Granma Province.

The longtime activist was leader of the “Liberation” Christian Movement (Movimiento Cristiano Liberación, MCL) and had spent time in a labour camp in the 1960s for his beliefs.

Oswaldo Payá’s death has sparked speculation among relatives and members of the dissident movement as to the exact circumstances of the car crash.

As an official investigation gets under way, activists are calling for a transparent probe into just how he lost his life.

Short-term detentions and imprisonment of prisoners of conscience continue to assault the very rights defended by Oswaldo Payá.

Still today, prisoners of conscience like Antonio Lima Cruz and Marcos Lima Cruz had to pay their tributes to Oswaldo Payá from behind bars.

In 1998, Oswaldo Payá co-founded the Proyecto Varela, a civil initiative advocating for political reforms through a legal process. A petition and proposal of law supported by more than 10,000 signatures was submitted to Cuba’s National Assembly in 2002 calling for a referendum on democratic transition.

The proposal was rejected by the government which responded by its own constitutional amendment through a referendum making the socialist state irrevocable.

In 2002, the European Parliament awarded Oswaldo Payá the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought recognizing his efforts in the pursuit of freedom of expression, free pluralist elections and the release of all political prisoners in Cuba.

Among the 75 prisoners of conscience sentenced in March 2003 were dozens of promoters of the Varela Project and members of the “Liberation” Christian Movement. The authorities released all prisoners of conscience conditionally between 2009 and 2010 but forced the majority into exile.

In the past, Oswaldo Payá reported being threatened by the authorities because of his activism. This highlights the difficulties and repression faced by human rights activists and political opponents in Cuba.